The International Year of the Family (IYF), 1994

Through the millennia, the family has been the pivotal institution around which virtually all societies have derived their strength and forged their future. With 1994 designated the International Year of the Family, the United Nations is giving renewed impetus to increased international cooperation in support of this fundamental institution. "Building the smallest democracy at the heart of society"—the Year's motto—reflects the pivotal role the family plays in ensuring the well-being of society.

When a society is cohesive, law-abiding and productive, the source of its strength can invariably be traced to the strength of its families. Today, families face many crises—famine, poverty, unemployment, drugs and AIDS—as well as changing economic, wage-earning and lifestyle structures. Nevertheless, the family remains a vital means of preserving and transmitting cultural values; it is the child's paradigm for the world outside. Now, in the Year, world attention is being focused on enabling the family to fulfil its functions as the source of emotional, financial and material support, essential for the well-being of its members.

The United Nations General Assembly designated 1994 as the International Year of the Family in its resolution 44/82 of 8 December 1989. The International Year was formally inaugurated by the General Assembly on 7 December 1993; its theme is "Family: resources and responsibilities in a changing world". The Year is the focal point for placing the family on the international agenda and encouraging activities at all levels by those concerned with family issues. A recognition of the rich pattern of diversity of family life across the globe will add a crucial dimension to the proceedings, as will the official acknowledgement of the family as the medium through which positive social change can be brought about.

As UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali stressed at the 28 November–2 December World NGO forum in Valletta, Malta, to launch the Year, "The International Year of the Family should help in the promotion of human rights, especially the rights of the child, individual freedoms and gender equality, both in the family context and in society at large." It is important to reinforce the family's inherent internal strengths to enable its members to realize their full potential.

It is of the utmost importance that parents—with the assistance of social support systems—be enabled to meet their responsibilities in their work and to their families. Maternity leave, child care and care for the elderly and infirm are some of the approaches that can help facilitate this. It is imperative that parents be assured that they will not be penalized in terms of job security or promotions for meeting their familial obligations.

The Year's objectives are:

- *To increase* awareness of family issues among Governments and the private sector;
- *To strengthen* national institutions in their efforts to develop, carry out and monitor family policies;
- *To stimulate* efforts to address family-related problems;
- *To enhance* the effectiveness of local, regional and national family programmes;
- *To improve* cooperation among national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs); and
- *To build* upon ongoing activities benefiting women, children, youth and ageing and disabled persons.

Governments, voluntary organizations and the private sector are expected to promote new awareness of problems—and solutions—to the multiple crises of families. They will undertake specific activities and observances at the local, regional and national levels, assisted by the United Nations and its system of organizations.

A time for popular participation

Because family-related concerns apply to most social policies, the Year can successfully bring together several social issues, previously treated separately, such as population, ageing, disability and youth.

In countries around the world, the Year is intended to lead to well-conceived national strategies to benefit families, including the adoption of family-related legislation

and social policy, especially as many current national policies and programmes still tend to be based on concepts and family models that may no longer reflect reality. Countries will have the opportunity to consider undertaking a general review of their respective national legislation to clarify its real or potential impact on families. New patterns of partnership that enable men to have a greater role in child care and development and women to explore new opportunities for education and employment require the Year to support new recommendations. This must be supported by research on the situation of families, assessment of existing services and identification of unmet needs.

The Year provides a way for people to influence policy-making at the local, national and regional levels. The Secretary-General pointed this out when he said in Valletta, Malta, "The World NGO Forum on launching the International Year of the Family is a fitting tribute to families as a reflection, at the grass-roots level, of the strengths and weaknesses of the social and developmental environment." But the Year will not succeed without the support and participation of families themselves.

Preparations undertaken

As many Governments and organizations have begun preparations and initiated observances, national coordinating bodies have been established in over 100 countries, national programmes of action are being developed in over 90 nations, and 94 Governments have designated national focal points on the IYF. Several countries have already identified priorities, started national programmes and begun information campaigns.

The General Assembly has invited NGOs to exert all possible efforts to prepare for and observe the Year and to cooperate with the United Nations to achieve the Year's goals. Many NGOs are fully involved in the Year's preparations, just as they were a major impetus in its proclamation. Several NGOs are bringing the Year's message to community organizations, the general public and families themselves, using their wide network of contacts and channels of communication. Others are organizing special meetings on the Year.

A major NGO initiative, the World NGO Forum on Launching the International Year of the Family (Valletta, Malta, 28 November–2 December), marked the beginning of the observance of the Year. It was organized by the Vienna NGO Committee on the Family in collaboration with its counterparts in New York and Paris. The Forum's theme was "Promoting Families for the Well-being of Individuals and Societies".

United Nations effort

At least 34 United Nations system organizations are carrying out activities for the Year. Collaboration will focus on information exchange, raising awareness and developing programmes, such as child survival and protection programmes, refugee assistance and drug-abuse education programmes.

The United Nations Secretary-General has appointed Mr. Henryk J. Sokalski as Coordinator for the International Year of the Family, and a small International Year of the Family Secretariat, headed by Mr. Sokalski, has been established within the Department for Policy Coordination and Sustainable Development. The IYF Secretariat is located in Vienna, Austria.

The Secretary-General has established a voluntary trust fund for the observance of the Year. It is being used to support national projects promoting the Year's objectives, especially in developing countries, and to provide technical support and advisory services to Governments. The fund is managed by the Secretariat for the Year, which is pursuing a fund-raising campaign covering the public and private sectors. As of 7 December 1993, total contributions and pledges to the fund amounted to over $1.7 million, including $1.2 million from organizations and individuals and $500,000 from Governments.

In 1993, regional preparatory meetings for the Year were held in Tunis, Tunisia, for Africa and Western Asia (29 March–2 April); in Valletta, Malta, for Europe and North America (26-30 April); in Beijing, China, for Asia and the Pacific (24-28 May); and in Cartagena, Colombia, for Latin America and the Caribbean (10-14 August). The meetings were organized by the IYF Secretariat in cooperation with the United Nations regional commissions and the host Governments.

More information is available from:

Coordinator for the International Year of the Family
United Nations Office at Vienna
P.O. Box 500, A-1400 Vienna, Austria
Tel.: (43-1) 21131 4223, Fax: (43-1) 23 74 97

Information Officer for the International Year of the Family
Department of Public Information
Room S-1040, United Nations
New York, NY 10017, USA
Fax: (212) 963 4556

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